Title: Technologies of immediacy: understanding the interplay between subjects and time/location specific social software.

Proposed supervisor: Anders Fagerjord, IMK, University of Oslo
Proposed co-supervisor (abroad): Geert Lovink, University of Amsterdam
Proposed co-supervisor (national): Hilde G. Corneliussen, University of Bergen

Brief summary:
This project seeks to understand the extent to which the underlying software architectures of microblogging and similar hybrid web-based communications platforms create forms of subjectivity and social interactions. Social software, like microblogs, are user-friendly publishing tools but also produce, represent and bring about human practices and culture. Academically this research situates itself within the emerging field of ‘software studies’, which holds that the properties of digital media are defined by the make-up of particular software. The tools which the software provides determine what we can do with digital media and how we understand it. I ask what kinds of assumptions about the world are embedded in the software and how these mindsets are appropriated or made use of by its users. More specifically, the aim of this project is to investigate social software that hinge on time or location specific awareness, through forms of immediacy and timeliness. The objects of study include the social software and microblogging platforms Twitter.com, Dodgeball.com, Plazes.com and Origo.no. It is my contention that these hybrid web-based communications platforms are technologies of immediacy, constituting key cultural techniques for contemporary culture. My project will aim to explore how the Zeitgeist of time efficiency and ubiquitous information demands tools suitable for the expression of self and resourceful communication. With ever-evolving techniques, tools and software underlying social interaction it is my intent to support efforts to increase an understanding of ‘sociable media’ as contingent on medium-specific features. This project asks: How is participatory culture performed in interactions with particular software tools, how are practices defined by medium-specific features, how do they evolve from this and what kind of worldviews does social software promote and represent?
Presentation of the problem/hypothesis

Research question: “How do subject-software relations manifest themselves within contemporary media culture?” Specifically, “What is the relationship between microblogging software and its users?”

A widespread contention in the vast literature on new media is that the emergence of the social web has changed fundamental aspects of how we relate to the world. It is a truism that the development of such applications as Wikipedia, YouTube and MySpace have redefined how people interact, collaborate and share information on the web, and greatly expanded the domain of the social in what used to be a much more technology-dominated sphere. But what is the underlying mechanism behind this perceived paradigm shift? In what way has “Web 2.0” and its “social software” changed human-computer interaction, and perhaps more importantly; contemporary culture in general?

This project's over-arching objective is to critically assess contemporary culture as manifested through the interplay between subjects and software tools in participatory media environments. What role does the software underlying new media applications play in facilitating sociality? And what practices are defined by and evolve out of these software functionalities? By looking at a set of new media applications, I will aim to provide an account of how social software determines and forms contemporary media use. One such case is that of microblogging, a new form of communication in which users can describe their current status in short posts distributed by instant messages, mobile phones, email or the Web. The hybrid media application Twitter (www.twitter.com), being one example, allows for constant contact as it provides social options not seen in previous new media applications. It allows for the opportunity to send short messages (status updates) to a distributed public on a wide variety of media platforms, as such relating uniquely to present time.

It is my contention that microblogging occupies a particularly interesting place in contemporary culture, as it uniquely projects notions of time and place. I argue that microblogging can be seen as a “technology of immediacy”, understood as technologies that embeds an awareness of present time and/or place. Microblogging services relate, express and perform the present in a way that affects our notion of immediacy. Twitter and similar services present an array of usage possibilities, for instance acting as an instant news source providing more up to date opinions on news events for public dissemination than any other communications platform. Being global in its reach, it also provides a good possibility for
following current discourses on a worldwide – scale as well as on the individual level. Twitter acts as a performative technology, representing and enacting current cultural conditions, such as scarcity of time and ever-evolving expectations of immediate value.

Following Donna Haraway (1997), I will attempt to understand contemporary culture and its media environments as emerging from a relational feature between the technical and the social. Haraway emphasizes how human practices are constructed in relation to, and along with, non-humans. As a direct consequence of this, the aim of my project will be to investigate time and location specific social software, from both the software layer and the social layer. This in order to understand how the interplay between the technical and the social represents, produces and brings about forms of contemporary culture. The relational aesthetics¹ at play here provides a way of judging software as a cultural object by means of the types of connections it facilitates.

I am interested in the ways of thinking and doing – understood as culture – that leak out of the domain of software and into everyday life. As such I am interested in the ways in which recent Internet applications relate to sociality, and what the “social” that is built into social software amounts to. In line with Sherry Turkle (1995), I consider the computer and the digital media devices of our time to fundamentally affect our awareness of ourselves and our relationship with the world. I ask what kinds of assumptions about the world are embedded in the software and how these mindsets are appropriated or made use of by its users.

An aesthetics of “appearance”² considers the conditions through which the world is given to us and presents itself. As such, software tools can be seen as devices through which appearance is produced, while making media the crucial cultural platform on which people interact with the world. The logic of the “now” appears as timeliness and immediate, being constitutive of what I call technologies of immediacy. The catchphrase of Twitter, “what are you doing?”, and the “name your plaze” question of the event-creator site Plazes (www.plazes.com), prompt answers about the appearance in time and space. I believe this notion of the present fits well with the condition of the contemporary communication environment characterized by a scarcity of time and attention. Questions that arise from this and which will illuminate how subject-software relations manifest themselves within contemporary media culture are the following:

¹ Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) Relational Aesthetics. Bourriaud provides an aesthetic theory in which artworks are judged based upon the inter-human relations which they represent, produce, or prompt.
² Martin Seel (2000) Ästhetik des Erscheinens takes on Nelson Goodman’s concept of appearance to signify the ways in which we relate to the world by constellations in the present.
1) “How is participatory culture performed in interactions with particular social software tools?”
2) “How are practices defined by and evolve from medium specific features?”
3) “What kind of worldviews does social software promote and represent?

**Background of the project**

Academically, my intent is to support efforts to increase an understanding of ‘sociable media’ as contingent on medium-specific features. Research on new media and the participatory culture of user-generated content production has largely concentrated on a narrow understanding of “the social”. Current debates on sociable media are centred on discourses concerning identity, patterns of use, social capital, community, public sphere, activism, etc. In contrast, very little research has been undertaken on how the social is operating in and through the specific software functionalities that form part of that ‘sociable web’. Following Geert Lovink (2008), this project contends that the path to understanding contemporary media culture lies somewhere between an analysis of the dominant software functionalities and the cultures that shape and are affected by the software. Facebook for instance makes you participate by offering a set of apps and social options such as ‘poke’, ‘comment on photos’, ‘tag pictures’, ‘status updates’, ‘write on walls’ etc. YouTube constructs interaction by functionalities such as ‘share/post video/add to groups’. These are properties of the software which enable certain pattern of responses. Lev Manovich pushes the line further by suggesting that software even *generates* new social behaviours: “with newly created social media behaviour we also need a new field of study to bring into focus the elements of digital culture created by software. Software shapes media behaviour and that is why we need to study it”\(^3\).

It is my contention that the technical aspects of the medium, in this case social software, plays an equally important role to the social aspects, such as identity and signification, in understanding society and culture. Whereas most research take the technicalities of a given medium for granted, I want to follow a methodology that treats (social) software inherently as a human-technical hybrid and therefore needs to be studied accordingly.

I believe this proposed research is an important contribution to the emerging field of software studies, as it draws attention to the underlying engines driving digital culture and

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\(^3\) Talk on user-generated content given by Lev Manovich at the Video Vortex conference in Brussels 05.10.2007
media studies – the software itself. The Software Studies Initiative at UCSD is a recently established research center for the interdisciplinary study of the ‘logic’ of new media directed by Lev Manovich. There is a clearly stated need for academics and practitioners to pay attention to the software layer of contemporary society, as it has received little or no academic attention. According to Manovich, an interest in the cultural and social effects of ICT must be accompanied by an interest in the logic of these media. The intention is to bridge research in the humanities and social sciences by thinking of software as a cultural object. I want to contribute to the theoretization and conceptualization of a contemporary media condition by situating the research interdisciplinary, and to come up with new concepts suitable for thinking about networked and participatory media culture.

Data/material and method
The question of how subject-software relations manifest themselves within contemporary media culture will be investigated by means of different case studies. Detailed case studies of Twitter.com, Dodgeball.com, Plazes.com, and Origo.no will provide the opportunity to study both the technical specificities of the social software in question, the affordances of these objects, the social and cultural effects of the medium and how these matters relate and affect contemporary media culture. I will recruit 10 informants from each of the microblogging services mentioned above and conduct interviews with the informants during the first year of the research. In Twitter’s case, informants are to be selected off the platform’s public timeline leading to their personal Twitter page, which provides additional information such as links to their blogs or e-mail addresses. This will make it easier to approach the users asking them to participate in my study. Probably I will use an instant messaging platform or Skype to conduct the interviews as I want to recruit people on a global scale. I will further conduct ethnographic observation on usage of these services, by following my informants status updates and conversations. Moreover I will use several mash-ups like Twittervision.com and Tweetscan.com to conduct a content and discourse analysis. Content analysis provides a detailed account of what a text contains, to locate themes, to seek nuances and for identifying patterns. Discourse analysis allows for investigating how language and meaning-making practices constructs and is constructed by social practice.

Three case studies informed by an ethnographic approach will be conducted in

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4 The logic of new media, according to Lev Manovich in his seminal work The Language of New Media (2001), is understood in terms of its programmable nature. Thus, what makes new media new is its programmability. Software makes new media programmable and renewable.

5 http://twitter.com/public_timeline
collaboration with my supervisor Anders Fagerjord, my co-supervisor Geert Lovink and possibly also with Lev Manovich at the Software Studies Initiative at UCSD. Taking into account that the field of new media changes fast, there might be applications and services that have not yet emerged, but might become crucial and interesting to focus on by the time this research is going to start. It is my contention that we will witness a rise in location and time specific social technologies in the years to come, including communication platforms experimenting with wireless, RFID, GPS and mapping techniques. The rise of microblogging serves as an exciting object of study located in-between “traditional” social networking sites, such as Facebook, and future technologies that emphasize time and location specific awareness.

My methods are influenced by recent social studies of technology (Haraway 1997, Latour 2005) that treat technical concepts, objects or practices as hybrid social-material entities to be investigated by following the “thing”, the “people” and the “metaphor” (Marcus 1998). Such a multi-sited ethnographic inquiry pays particular close attention to the shifting of contexts, changes in status, how the object of study enters into a variety of discourses and practices, and the ways in which it is subject to distinct modes of participation and circulation.

I will further draw data from various other sources including mailing lists (Nettime, AOIR, softwareandculture, MEA), wikis, blogs and magazines to trace the discourses and practices surrounding the microblogging software and usage. As part of the participant observation I will use all the mentioned platforms on a regular basis, conducting ‘fieldnotes’ by setting up a blog account (which allows for interactions with other bloggers/users), in providing a framework for a reflexive understanding of using the software. I also want to use software tools that are specifically created for online research. There are some tools available and more so under development.

My research will deal with ethical issues concerning the nature of online research, including questions concerning access to data material (membership requirements versus publicly available data), informed consent and whether to treat data material as “texts” or “people” are just some of the issues that will be more closely elaborated on during the course of my research. The Association of Internet Researchers’ guidelines will serve as my fixed point in conducting ethical research.

**Theoretical locus**

In addressing the issues I have set out, I will draw on a range of data from different disciplines. Work in ‘software studies’ and ‘new media’ will be particularly important in
answering questions on the interplay between subjects and software functionalities, as well as in framing a cultural conceptualization of software (Chun 2006, Manovich 2001, Galloway 2006, Fuller 2003, Mackenzie 2006, Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003). Recent work on social networking and computer-mediated communication (Boyd and Ellison 2007, Humphreys 2007, Donath 2007) illuminate the various social implications digital media have on issues of privacy, presentations of self, social interactions, discursive formations etc. These forms of research show how identity and social performance are co-constituted, but also highlight how software impacts the social expressions online (Dibbel 1998), and how it shapes social (inter)actions (Boyd 2007, 2008). Theories of technology (Latour 2005, Heidegger 1977, Marcuse 1982, Winner 1986, Ihde 1990, Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999) provide perspectives on how to conceptualize social software in terms of technology and what kinds of imaginaries that go into ‘social software’ as tools. What is it, that social software is held to assist us in? As a tool, what kind of actions does social software perform? And what kinds of social effects do these media technologies achieve?

In one sense this project comes close to the kind of media materialism associated with Friedrich Kittler (1999). Focus is here on the material structures of technologies and the changes these introduce into culture. Kittler provides some useful entry points into the field in terms of thinking about the transformative possibilities of the technical. Theories of material culture will serve as another entry point for my research (Miller 2005, Brown 2004, Latour 1992) and in understanding culture as practice, as a ‘ways of doing’. The concept of “affordance” illuminates how practices may evolve from and be designed by the quality of the software allowing for actions to be performed (Gibson 1977, Hutchby 2001). Meaning making practices such as collaboration, content contribution, participation, browsing, blogging etc. are seen as the cultures of software. My theoretical starting point will be Matthew Fuller’s conceptualization of software:

“as a form of digital subjectivity – that software constructs sensoriums, that each piece of software constructs ways of seeing, knowing and doing in the world that at once contain a model of that part of the world it ostensibly pertains to and that also shape it every time it is used” (2003, p.19)

Rancière’s (2004) notion of the Politics of Aesthetics that determine a mode of articulation between forms of actions and thought reflects the kind of aesthetics at work in software. In establishing his political-aesthetic theory, Rancière provides very interesting perspectives
on the relational nature of social software and its social implications. The everyday ‘ways of doing’ and the ‘webs of significations’ of participatory media culture will be discussed by tracing connections between theories of digital culture that deal with modes of production and consumption and the kinds of networks that are at play (see Benkler 2006, Lovink 2008, Jenkins 2006, De Certeau 1984, Virno 2004).

Last but not least, rhetorical theory and particularly the concept of kairos⁶ (Covino and Joliffe 1995, Kinneavy 2002, De Certeau 1984) provide perspectives on the particular awareness of time and place that microblogging and locative media (understood as communication-facilitating media bound to a geographical location) are entangled in. Kairos highlights the importance of timeliness in oration, illuminating how a given context of communication both calls for and constrains speech. Seeing blogging (and participating on the internet in general) as a kind of oration, and as such affected by kairos, calls for a whole set of new questions to be asked. For instance, what are the opportunities offered by a rhetorical situation and what role do the technicalities of the medium play in acts of persuasion?

In my MSc dissertation (Bucher 2007), I show how the rhetorical construction of participation in “citizen journalism” is facilitated by an active use of kairos. Here I looked at how people were encouraged to take part in the production of news stories, giving of their time in order to change the nature of journalism. It is my contention that the value of immediacy, the significance of here-and-now, is one of the driving forces behind participatory culture. As a consequence, I want to look at how technologies act rhetorically through imperatives such as ‘upload content’, ‘tag this’, ‘edit this page’ in order to understand practices of participation and content contribution. These instructions are part of the software architecture and work in different ways to operationalize the social.

**Supplementary information:**

It is with a profound interest in human-non-human relations, technological and social change, as well as a deep interest in the Internet as a medium and phenomena that this project has come about. Having studied cultures of participation on the web through my MSc thesis at the London School of Economics, I have developed my interest in socio-technical constellations further and thus become intrigued by the emerging field of research on software studies.

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⁶ In rhetorical theory, kairos is used to describe the opportune time for action (speech). Kairos is what presses the rhetor forward to speak while at the same time constituting the value of speech. Kairos is always designates a rhetorical situation and a particular relation to time (and place). Kairos can be linked to Michael De Certeau’s notion of tactics, understood as the ways one makes use of the opportunities offered by a particular situation.
Coming from both a sociological and communications background I consider software to be a very important, yet understudied, domain in cultural and media studies.

I have established contact with various scholars associated with the emerging field of software studies and plan on conducting some of my research in affiliation with this network. I will be co-operating with Geert Lovink, an associate professor in new media at the University of Amsterdam, who has published widely on critical internet culture, new media and network theory and blogging (2008, 2003, and 2002).

**Publicising:**
I plan on getting four articles published during the course of my three year PhD period. Possible journals for submitting articles include: First Monday, Fibreculture, New Media & Society and Convergence. I will also attend as many relevant conferences as possible and network events that will benefit my thinking and research. I would also like to create a forum for academic debate at IMK, in forms of seminars where people can present their ongoing research and exchange ideas on a regular basis (once a month). I think such seminars would be valuable especially for PhD and master students.

**Progress plan:**
2009: Initiation of my research by writing small chapters. Research phase. Read up and conduct research on the technical features of microblogging software and other software architectures that will be relevant for my study. Attend theory courses of 30 study points. Start writing on theory and present my first ideas on graduate conferences/summer school and other conferences. I will recruit informants from Twitter.com, Dodgeball.com, Plazes.com, and Origo.no and start conducting interviews. I plan on writing one article based on my initial research findings. Twitter conversations, participatory culture and the role of Twitter’s underlying software architecture in shaping these participatory practices.

2010: Spend six months at either the University of Amsterdam or Goldsmiths University. Collaborate on microblogging case study with scholars undertaking similar research. I will aspire to write two articles during my second year, possibly based on my discourse and content analysis of Twitter conversations, participatory culture and the role of Twitter’s underlying software architecture in shaping these participatory practices. Continue writing chapters on theory, methods and case study. Research phase.
2011: Probably a shorter stay at the Software Studies Initiative at the University of California, San Diego. Probably conducting a case study on the role of interface in hybrid media, investigating the role that different interfaces (IM, web, mobile) play in time and location specific media use (possibly through a microblogging platform). Writing one article based on findings. Revising of theory, methods and case study chapters. Final writing phase.

References


